

**THE IRISH QUESTION:  
A REPLY TO MR.  
GLADSTONE, PP. 1-78**

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**THOS. E. WEBB**

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THE  
IRISH QUESTION.

I.

THE TRUE HISTORY OF THE IDEA.

Let the Irish Nationalists but once become the arbiters of the fate of the two English Parties, and one or other of these political hucksters whose system of party government is so fast settling down upon the lees of its demoralization, will sell the unity of their Empire to defeat their rivals.—THE NEW LUCIAN.

THE General Election of 1886 will be as memorable in our annals as the General Election of 1832, and the appeal to the people, which resulted in the Convention Parliament of 1689. It was an election in which the constituencies were called upon to consider a change in the political system that amounted to a revolution. The decision of the people was as near an approximation to a plebiscite as the nature of our institutions would admit. A vast population, newly enfranchised, and to all appearance without a previous political education, was called on to regard the wisdom of all the

great statesmen of the past as folly, and to accept a folly of the Minister by whom they were enfranchised as the highest wisdom. To seduce them into authorizing the new departure the Minister exhausted all the electioneering arts of which an experience of fifty years had made him master. He appealed to them as the honest and unsophisticated masses. He invited them to crush the dishonest and interested classes. He told them that by a species of divine intuition they could determine questions which might have taxed the whole intellect of a Machiavelli or a Montesquieu. But it was all in vain. The new Democracy showed that it was animated by the imperial instinct of Milton's great and puissant people. It refused to authorize any tampering with the foundations of the Empire. It repudiated the idea of breaking up the United Kingdom. It insisted on the maintenance of the United Parliament in its undivided sovereignty and power. It would not hear of the Repeal of the great Act of Union by which the United Parliament, the United Kingdom, and the United Empire were created.

Deserted by his friends, defeated in Parliament, and disowned by the people, Mr. Gladstone, if he had been a cynic or a sage, would have retired to the woods of Hawarden, and resumed the ecclesiastical studies to which he intended to devote the remainder of his life in 1874. But quiet to quick spirits is a hell. Conscious that at the close of life he has lost prestige as well as place, the fallen statesman

has resolved, by one last effort, to rehabilitate himself before the country. Once more he has abandoned the platform for the press. In the case of his policy for the future government of Ireland, as in the case of his policy with reference to the Irish Church, he has thought it necessary to commit the vindication of his character to writing; and accordingly he has supplied the world with another *Chapter of Autobiography*, in the Pamphlet which he has just issued for our information and our learning.

The new Apology deals with two different sets of questions, one relating to the character of the statesman, the other concerning the continued existence and future welfare of the state. In the first set of questions the public has in a great measure lost its interest. How long the late Minister had been a secret convert to Home Rule, what covert intimations he had given to his countrymen of the fact of his conversion, under what circumstances he publicly proclaimed that he had been converted—these are matters of as little concern to serious men as if they related to his recently reported conversion to the ancient faith. The conversions of the late Minister have long ceased to excite even a sensation of surprise. But his Pamphlet raises higher and more important issues—issues in which the history of the past and the fate of the future are involved. Is the United Parliament a failure? Is the United Kingdom a mistake? Is the centre of the United

Empire to be shifted? And if the triple unity of Parliament and Kingdom and Empire is to be dissolved, by what are the existing relations between Ireland and Great Britain to be replaced? By a separation of the countries? By the subordination of the separate parliament of one country to the separate parliament of the other? By two parliaments mutually independent? By a federation of separate states? Or by intestine discord and fierce civil strife, again to end in subjugation? Compared with these questions, which touch our very being as a people, what can be more trivial than the discussion of questions of conduct and conscience with a fallen statesman? Mr. Gladstone says he has been charged with a 'grave offence'. He says he is confronted with the horns of a horrible 'dilemma'. He says he is accused of a 'plot against his friends', and of an 'attempt to carry the country by surprise'. To meet these charges Mr. Gladstone has published what he calls the *History of an Idea*. But the history of Mr. Gladstone's Idea is something more than a mere history of Mr. Gladstone's mind. It is offered to the world not merely as a defence of Mr. Gladstone, but as a defence of the principle of Autonomy for Ireland. It supplies a text-book for the followers of Mr. Parnell. It will take its place beside the *Autobiography* of Wolfe Tone in the library of Mr. Davitt. It is 'making history' (p. 9) like Mr. Carey. It will be a possession for ever to the Irish World.



That the proposal to concede a separate Parliament to Ireland was in fact a surprise to the country Mr. Gladstone incidentally admits. 'Twelve months ago', he says, 'the subject was almost as foreign to the British mind as the differential calculus' (p. 38). Was it as foreign to the mind of Mr. Gladstone? The Nationalism of Mr. Parnell stands to the Home Rule of Mr. Butt in much the same relation as the differential calculus of Leibnitz stands to the fluxions of Sir Isaac Newton—the one was a development and simplification of the other. Mr. Gladstone asserts that so far back as 1871 he had accepted the principle of *fluxions*. But in what sense? To ascertain this, let us see what Mr. Butt proposed, and how Mr. Gladstone treated the proposal. At the historic meeting, held in Dublin in May, 1870, the father of Home Rule proposed and carried a resolution that 'the true remedy for the evils of Ireland is the establishment of an Irish Parliament, with full control over its own domestic affairs'. This, it is obvious, is the principle of the scheme which Mr. Gladstone proposed in 1886; what did he think of it in 1871? At that time there was no Land League in existence; there were no Invincibles in Ireland; there were no Dynamiters in America; and though there was agrarian outrage there were no men marching through rapine and murder to the disintegration of the Empire. Mr. Gladstone at the moment was the head of 'the great administration', with a majority

of upwards of a hundred at his back. Everything was favourable to the proposal—the planets were in trine. Mr. Butt assured the world that, though ‘Parliament was to be broken up’, still ‘the Union of the Kingdoms under Her Majesty was to be maintained’ (p. 14). What, then, was Mr. Gladstone’s language? He says that his ‘language and conduct’ have been ‘governed by uniformity of principle’, and that he has ‘no change of opinion’ to vindicate or to acknowledge (p. 4). Mr. Gladstone refers us to his speech at Aberdeen on the 26th of September, 1871, as a record of the course he then adopted. ‘Instead of denouncing the idea of Home Rule’, he says, ‘as one in its essence destructive of the unity of the Empire, I accepted the assurance’ of Mr. Butt (p. 14). Accepting Mr. Butt’s assurance, that he intended to maintain the Union, in what manner did Mr. Gladstone treat Mr. Butt’s proposal? Let us judge him by his words. ‘Why is Parliament to be broken up?’ he asked, in tones of virtuous indignation. ‘Has Ireland a grievance? What is it that Ireland has demanded from the Imperial Parliament that the Imperial Parliament has refused?’ The practised orator then changed his tone. ‘It is stated’, he said, ‘that there is a vast quantity of fish in the seas that surround Ireland, and that if they had Home Rule they would catch a great deal of these fish’. The audience was convulsed with laughter. ‘What are the inequalities of England and Ireland?’ he asked; and he declared that he knew of none, except

that Ireland was favoured in matters of taxation—a feeble case, he said, for a proposal by which ‘the fabric of the United Parliament was to be destroyed’. The audience cheered. The triumphant orator proceeded. ‘Can any sensible man’, he asked, ‘can any rational man, suppose that at this time of day, in this condition of the world, we are going to disintegrate the great capital institutions of the country, for the purpose of making ourselves ridiculous in the sight of all mankind, and crippling any power we possess for bestowing benefits through legislation on the country to which we belong?’ Every sensible and rational man in Aberdeen accepted this outburst as the words of sense and reason. According to the Pamphlet, however, the words were only used in an esoteric sense. Mr. Gladstone, in fact, tells us that instead of denouncing the Idea ‘in its essence’, he was only taking ‘a considerable step towards placing the controversy on its true basis’ (p. 14).

Let us see the next considerable step that Mr. Gladstone took. In 1874, Mr. Butt, who was then in Parliament, backed by sixty representatives of the Irish people, proposed to move, ‘That it is expedient and just to restore to the Irish Nation the right and power of managing all exclusively Irish affairs in an Irish Parliament; and that provision should be made at the same time for maintaining the integrity of the Empire, and the connection between the countries, by reserving to this Imperial Parliament full and exclusive control over all Im-